

VZCZCXR02525
RR RUEHBI RUEHCI
DE RUEHCG #0668/01 3130808
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 090808Z NOV 07
FM AMCONSUL CHENNAI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1324
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 2848
INFO RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 5135
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 0865
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 1368

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CHENNAI 000668

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

PLEASE PASS TO IRF/JOANNELLA MORALES

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: PHUM PREL SOCI IN
SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN ANDHRA PRADESH

¶11. (SBU) SUMMARY: The south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh recently enacted a law allowing the government to identify places of worship where the propagation of any religion other than the religion traditionally practiced at the identified location is prohibited. Thus far, the state has only identified Hindu religious sites to receive this protection. Christians in Andhra Pradesh report that the state fares well on religious freedom when compared to the rest of India, but some, citing an increase in attacks on Christians, worry that the new anti-propagation law will embolden Hindu nationalists and lead to further attacks. Muslims say their prime concerns are jobs and educational opportunities. END SUMMARY.

ANDHRA PRADESH ENACTS ANTI-PROPAGATION ORDINANCE

¶12. (U) In May 2007, the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh enacted the "Propagation of other religions in the places of worship or prayer (Prohibition) Law." The act empowers the government to prohibit the propagation of religion in a place of worship other than the religion traditionally practiced at such place (for example, barring Christians from proselytizing at a Hindu temple). The act does not apply to all places of worship; the government must affirmatively "notify" which places of worship are covered. To date, the government has only extended the act's protection to Hindu sites. Punishment for violations of the act can include imprisonment up to three years and fines up to 125 USD. To date, there have been no prosecutions under the act.

¶13. (U) I.V. Subba Rao, the government official responsible for administering the law, explained to a visiting officer from the Office of International Religious Freedom that the government enacted the ordinance to address concerns among Hindus about the propagation of other religions at particularly important temples, especially the Tirupati Tirumala Devasthanams (TTD). (NOTE: Tirupati is one of south India's most important Hindu sites, believed to be home of Lord Venkateshwara (one of the avatars of the Hindu god Vishnu). More than 50,000 pilgrims visit the site each day. END NOTE.) Trouble first arose in Tirupati in 2006 when Christian missionaries were accused of distributing pamphlets there. He said the act will help avert disturbances to public harmony stemming from Hindu apprehension over propagation at their holy sites.

¶14. (SBU) Rao acknowledged that at the moment only Hindu sites like TTD have been notified, thus activating the law's prohibition against propagation of other religions at the site. But he explained that other religions' places of worship could also receive the same protections, saying "the list is open ended; the rules and guidelines of the Act are being framed. Any other religion can be included. Other communities have not approached us for notification, however."

CHRISTIANS SAY ANDHRA PRADESH BETTER THAN MUCH OF INDIA

¶ 15. (SBU) Christian interlocutors acknowledged to the visiting IRF officer that Andhra Pradesh compares favorably to other states in India with respect to religious freedom. Father Eugene Pereira of the Archdiocese of Hyderabad, noted that in contrast to other parts of India no nuns and priests have been in Andhra Pradesh. In contrast, while acknowledging that there are far fewer such incidents in the state than in Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Orissa and Jharkhand, all controlled by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), representatives from the Protestant All India Christian Council (AICC) claimed an increase in attacks against congregants under their purview.

¶ 16. (SBU) There was disagreement over whether proselytization by Protestant groups led to more attacks. Andreas D'Souza, who leads a non-governmental organization promoting reconciliation between people of different faiths, said that news of aggressive proselytization in states like Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Gujarat has led to more attacks on Christians in Andhra Pradesh. Father Pereira was critical of Protestant groups, saying they were "perceived" to be involved in unethical conversion. The AICC dismissed the accusation, saying there was a great deal of false propaganda alleging forceful conversion on the part of Protestant missionaries. AICC argued that the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, who is a convert to Christianity himself, felt compelled to enact the anti-propagation law for political cover from Andhra Pradesh's dominant Hindu population. AICC worried that the law is a first step in the implementation of a Hindu nationalist agenda and will embolden extremists, leading to further attacks against Christians in the state.

CHENNAI 00000668 002 OF 002

MUSLIMS WORRIED ABOUT JOBS . . .

¶ 17. (SBU) A Muslim on the State Minorities Welfare Board said, "The Government does everything for religious harmony as far as Muslims are concerned. But Muslims need economic empowerment." In a roundtable discussion with Muslim leaders, academics and experts from various fields expressed concern over limited opportunities available for Muslims in the country. According to one participant, Muslims filled thirty-seven percent of government jobs in 1947; now the figure stands at only three percent. All interlocutors approved of the recent introduction of a four percent reservation (quota) for Muslims for seats in higher education and government employment.

. . . AND ANGRY ABOUT IRAQ

¶ 18. (SBU) Despite the fact that religious freedom was the subject of the roundtable, discussion quickly turned to Muslim anger over the U.S. decision to invade Iraq and the perception that the United States is waging a war against Islam. A prominent businessman asked that U.S. officials avoid using the terms "Islamic terrorist" and "Islamic fundamentalist." He said Muslims feel these terms are a condemnation of Islam, which inflames religious sentiment, often leading to acts of terrorism.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM: THE SOUTH IS DIFFERENT

¶ 19. COMMENT: Compared to the states in north India's Hindi speaking "cow belt," religious conflict is relatively rare in south India. The reasons are many. Religious minorities, especially Christians, are more prevalent in the south. More importantly, Christians and Muslims have deep roots in the southern states: Christianity reportedly came to south India in the first century and Islam is believed to have arrived during the lifetime of the prophet Muhammad. As a result, the communities are well-integrated into mainstream society. Given this history of religious integration, Andhra Pradesh's anti-propagation law is very likely a genuine attempt to preserve harmony between communities in the state by

ensuring that no group proselytizes at another's place of worship. The government has thus far been judicious, only identifying the most sacred Hindu sites for protection. END COMMENT.

¶10. This cable was coordinated with Embassy New Delhi and cleared by Joannella Morales, Office of International Religious Freedom.

FRY